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Escalation in Iraq Raises Questions About Tensions Between Saudi Arabia and Iran

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Brief Analysis

Following the events of September 11, 2001, US-NATO military interventions brought the United States directly into Middle Eastern affairs while costing the country more than [7,000 lives](#) and approximately [\\$5.5 trillion dollars](#). However, the regional perspective of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in particular is that its main result was in providing the groundwork for Iran's expanding footprint in the Middle East, particularly through a destabilized Iraq. The problem of unrest in Iraq continues to haunt the United States and the Iraqis themselves almost two decades after the invasion. The escalation of attacks by Kat'aib Hezbollah and the subsequent U.S. response—which has culminated in the killing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force leader Qassem Soleimani suggests that the United States may be willing to re-enter the Middle East theater, but the potential steps Iran is likely to take in retaliation are unclear.

The apparent willingness of Iranian-backed proxies to target areas with an American presence in Iraq should also be seen as a warning sign for potential future attacks on Iraq's neighbor: Saudi Arabia. While the animosity between the two states is not new, Iran's interest in shaping the region has fundamentally realigned the focus of numerous Arab states, and particularly the Saudi monarchy. Years of Iranian encroachment has reinforced the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's self-perception as the 'Sunni protector' of the Arab world. To this end, Saudi Arabia has taken on its perceived regional responsibility of confronting Iran through a number of political, economic, and security measures—including economic efforts to push Iraq away from Iran.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has notably presided over a series of targeted policies in the past several years that have also contributed to bringing the two countries closer to direct conflict. These include the March 2015 declaration to form the [Arab Coalition to Support the Legitimate Government in Yemen](#) and the [execution of the prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr](#) in 2016, which led to Iranian protesters attacking the Saudi Embassy in Tehran and the end of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

On its end, Iran views the Saudi challenge to its own supremacy in the region as more doctrinal than political in

nature. Saudi Arabia derives political and spiritual legitimacy in the Islamic world from the presence of Mecca and Medina—a dynamic that Khomeini targeted explicitly on multiple occasions. For this reason, Iran has made efforts to internationalize the hajj pilgrimage to wrest claims of unique religious legitimacy from Saudi Arabia's hands and shift the seat of Islamic legitimacy to Qom—a major center of Shia academic learning—and Tehran.

With the United States' extended exertion of significant financial pressure through ongoing sanctions on Iran after its withdrawal from the JCPOA, the state's options to continue its spread of influence into the region have dramatically been reduced—especially given the latest protests in Iraq and Lebanon. However, desperation—and a desire to retaliate after the U.S. attack on Soleimani—is likely to breed increased aggression in Iran against a country seen as facilitating U.S. pressure. Iran has already shown a willingness to target Saudi Arabia through a series of unprecedented airstrikes and rocket attacks on Saudi Aramco's oil installations in Khurais and Abqaiq. While these attacks have not been confirmed as coming directly from Iran and instead have been claimed by Yemen's Houthis, the attack is widely believed to having been **directly orchestrated by Iran**.

Such attacks may have occurred because the Iranian leadership believes that confronting Saudi Arabia may be the quickest way to drag the region into war, bringing tensions out into the open and creating an opportunity for renegotiating U.S. pressures in order to bring the fight to a close. Iran has already repeatedly tested the United States through escalating actions, including the derailing of several oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz. A war with Saudi Arabia may be seen as an increasingly attractive valve to redirect the mounting pressures inside Iran itself.

This constant state of “not-war” but “not-peace,” a term coined by Ali Khamenei and described as “active resistance” by the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Bagheri, has significantly depleted Iran's national capacities and subsequently narrowed its options, which may push the country to all-out war after the U.S. decision to escalate in Iraq. Iran has had months to prepare: **military exercises** Iran conducted in the Persian Gulf were accompanied by a large military parade commemorating the start of the Iran-Iraq War and served as a direct message that Iran is ready for future conflicts.

It is increasingly apparent that Iraq is likely a principle site of that battle. While Lebanon and Syria are both key players in Iran's ‘axis of resistance,’ Iraq is considered its main pillar, due to its size, proximity to Iran, the strength of its pro-Iranian militias relative to Iraq's army, and the country's ever attractive oil sector.

For years, Iraq was understood as a stronghold of Iranian support given the country's stranglehold on the Iraqi economy, its pro-Iranian militias, and the number of pro-Iranian politicians in power. Even so, both the United States and Saudi Arabia have attempted to reduce Iranian influence in Iraq through economic means, though it is the Iraqi people themselves who have come out forcefully to protest against Iranian intervention.

The ongoing Iraqi demonstrations—which have already unseated the government and continue to challenge Iranian proxies' hold on the country—do pose a major threat to Iranian influence in Iraq, but they are also providing a window for Iran to use the governmental reshuffle to further tighten its grip on Iraq's political and security sectors.

The tangled knot of competing interests centering around Iraq raises the question of how the United States has become re-entangled in a region from which its president has repeatedly expressed a desire to withdraw. Given the potential for Iran to lash out at the America's regional partners, the United States should make every effort to support Saudi defensive capabilities in the case of more direct attacks by Iran.

Once again, the situation in Iraq occupies the crux of a larger regional struggle. And while this time, the United States appears increasingly averse to any regional military involvement, its government must consider what support it should provide regionally to ensure that Iran does not regain the upper hand.

In particular, Saudi Arabia will benefit from help from the United States in identifying the strategic gaps through which Iran managed to conduct its latest attacks. The United States should help install early warning systems to alert

against Iranian attacks, while waging cyberattacks against Iranian command and control systems throughout the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and on Iranian warships. While Saudi Arabia has held indirect peace talks with the Houthis, Iraq's situation is volatile and therefore dangerous. ❖



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